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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 001188

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SUBJECT: HEADS OR TAILS? GOVERNMENT OR NO GOVERNMENT?

REF: BEIRUT 1131

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The positive atmosphere engendered by the Syrian-Saudi rapprochement in mid-October is dissipating as negotiations about the details of cabinet formation drag on, sources say. Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri's allies are beginning to question the wisdom of his negotiating tactics, although they continue to stand by him. Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun's continued stubbornness is an attempt to challenge his Christian competitors and either retain the ministries he has or force all sides to rotate ministries, contacts tell us. Many observers believe, however, that Syrian pressure is building on Aoun to compromise. Interlocutors agree on one thing: Hizballah is eager to join the government in order to be shielded from Israel. All sides seem eager to resolve the impasse, albeit with a minimal loss of face. End Summary.

LEBANESE FORCES HELPING HARIRI, BUT FRUSTRATED

¶2. (C) The positive atmosphere engendered by the Syrian-Saudi rapprochement in mid-October (reftel) is beginning to dissipate as negotiations about the details of cabinet formation drag on, sources say. The Lebanese Forces (LF) are playing an "easing" role in cabinet formation, LF head Samir Geagea's advisor Elie Khoury explained to polchief on October 30. For example, Hariri suggested that the LF accept the justice ministry in its quota to keep it out of the opposition's hands due to concerns that they would "put sticks in the wheels" of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) should they take the ministry. Geagea has also maintained close coordination with Hariri and is even ready to give up a claim to any Maronite ministers or a second ministry to form the cabinet. Nevertheless, the March 14 base, Khoury reported, is beginning to ask why Hariri "raised the roof" of his demands unnecessarily for four months only to slowly capitulate to Aoun's demands. "It is becoming clear that March 14 has no strategy while March 8 is a professional orchestra," Khoury complained.

¶3. (C) Aoun's continuing demands are a reaction to statements by other Christian leaders, in particular Geagea's recent comment that March 14 would never allow Aoun to control the justice ministry. "Aoun doesn't like anyone else to lead," Khoury reasoned, pointing Aoun's escalatory rhetoric just as his ally Marada leader Samir Frangieh began a conciliatory

campaign to call for a cabinet to be formed through Marada foregoing a ministry. Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir may have sought to help March 14 on October 30 by saying that the majority and opposition cannot meet in a national unity government, but the comments came at "a bad time," Khoury admitted.

PSP PESSIMISTIC GOVERNMENT WILL BE EFFECTIVENESS

14. (C) The current disagreement, Progressive Socialist Party MP Wael Abu Faour explained to polchief on October 29, is still control of the telecommunications ministry and the issue of whether Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil will return to it as minister. The majority considered giving Aoun the justice ministry instead but decided that was dangerous given concerns over the STL. The goal is to give Aoun a package deal returning telecoms to the FPM but without Bassil in the ministry. The FPM would also be given three minor ministries, including social affairs and labor, in addition to a minister of state position.

15. (C) Abu Faour said that Syrian pressure is building on Aoun to compromise, particularly via Frangieh, who has been very active and outspoken over the last week. These signs from Syria, Abu Faour believed, indicated that a cabinet would be formed in a matter of days. Despite Aoun's stubbornness, his Shia allies abandoned him in 2008 at Doha over the issue of the presidency, Abu Faour pointed out, and they will do it again if necessary. Abu Faour said that relations with the LF were good and assessed that the Christian party was easing negotiations. Regarding the

effectiveness of whatever government was formed, a downcast Abu Faour assessed that it would accomplish nothing substantial. "Saad,s plane will land," he said, "and he will have to face reality.8

FPM DEMANDS COMPROMISE

16. (C) "We're in the last 100 meters of the race, the final compromise," FPM MP Alain Aoun told poloff on October 28. The FPM's main demand is either for all parties to rotate the ministries they hold or for the FPM to keep the telecoms ministry and the energy ministry, which Hariri is trying to strip from it, Aoun relayed. "Saad doesn't have anything else to wait for; there's no other solution except coming to agreement with Aoun," he emphasized. If Hariri had offered immediately after elections what he is now close to giving the FPM, "he would have been like God to the Lebanese, but doing it four months later, he's a loser," Aoun said. While Aoun admitted that all sides created false obstacles to progress, "now someone has to lose." Despite his trouble forming the cabinet, Hariri might not be hobbled in ruling, Aoun judged, because of his generally good personal relations with opposition leaders.

TASHNAQ UPBEAT

17. (C) The ongoing contact between Hariri and Aoun, in addition to regional calm and popular pressure to resolve the impasse, was the best sign that government formation will not stall, Tashnaq MP Hagop Pakradounian told poloff on October

128. Pakradounian reasoned that a Hariri-led government would make real achievements in its first year -- absent a Sunni-Shia clash -- since Hariri is ready to be a leader of all Lebanese, not just March 14. His broad dialog with the opposition -- especially Aoun -- during his second attempt to form a government, Pakradounian said, is evidence of this. "Saad is a guy able to do this, and General Aoun is the guy who can do this in the Christian area."

18. (C) COMMENT: The winds of the cabinet formation process are constantly shifting. One thing our interlocutors agree, however, is that Hizballah is eager to join the government in order to be shielded from Israel. March 14's leaders have

become increasingly downcast as Hariri gradually backs down from the maximalist positions he staked out early, and they report that the March 14 base is also disillusioned. All sides now seem eager to resolve the impasse, albeit with each still hoping to maintain a maximum amount of face.

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